

Combating Respiratory Disease

Why prevention is so important



This information is brought to you by Intervet, leading manufacturer of the Equilis range of respiratory vaccines: Prequenza, Resequin and StrepE.

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Introduction

Equine Respiratory Disease is one of the main causes of poor performance in competing horses. Horses that regularly mix are extremely vulnerable to bacterial or viral infections which can easily spread from one horse to another. Your horse can easily develop ailments in much the same way as we catch colds or the 'flu, yet we expect horses to perform at their peak even when they do not feel well.

Respiratory diseases that may affect your horse include:

- Equine Influenza
- Equine Herpes Virus (EHV)
- Strangles
- Recurrent Airway Obstruction (also known as COPD or Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease)

Your vet will be able to advise you on a vaccination or prevention programme to help defend against these diseases and reduce any chance of your horse spreading infection to others.

Equine Influenza



'Flu is a highly infectious viral disease which affects the respiratory tract including the windpipe and lungs.



Widespread throughout the horse population, influenza spreads rapidly, due to a combination of a short incubation period of one to three days and coughing during early stages of the disease. The virus is transmitted by direct horse-to-horse contact and indirect contact via humans, tack, feed and equipment.

Signs include:

- Dry, harsh cough
- Raised temperature
- Watery nasal discharge
- Lack of appetite
- Lethargy
- Muscle soreness
- Painful glands under the jaw

Following a bout of 'flu, it's important to give a horse complete rest for at least six weeks, to allow it to recover. Without rest, there's a small but increased risk of myocarditis, an inflammation of the heart muscle, which can subsequently cause an irregular heartbeat. Other complications include post-viral cough, secondary bacterial infection, bronchitis or bacterial pneumonia.

Equine Herpes Virus (EHV)



Equine Herpes Virus is a viral disease which is less familiar to horse owners but just as contagious as 'flu.

Equine herpes virus cause severe loss of form and associated problems including abortion and paralysis and, like its human counterpart, the virus can recur time after time. It's estimated that a staggering 75% of horses become 'silent' carriers, able to pass it on to others without displaying any signs.

The disease can also remain dormant in previously infected horses and can be reactivated by 'stress' factors such as transport, competing, a change in environment and - in the case of youngsters - weaning, sales and breaking-in.

The first signs of EHV are often mistaken as a bit of a cold or 'flu' and, like so many respiratory diseases, EHV is spread by direct or indirect contact, so early recognition is important.

Signs include:

- Fever
- Nasal discharge, which may contain mucus and pus
- Coughing that can last for up to three weeks
- Swollen glands

Horses with EHV should be given complete rest for several weeks, especially as their reduced immunity will make them susceptible to other infections.

Strangles



Strangles is a highly contagious disease caused by the bacterium, *Streptococcus equi*.

Whilst the incubation period of Strangles is approximately two weeks, infected horses can release the bacterium for long periods, so new outbreaks can occur up to three weeks after the initial outbreak. About 10% of horses can carry the disease after an infection of Strangles up to a year previously.

Strangles is transmitted by direct and indirect contact and particularly through shared water sources, where the bacterium lives for longer periods. It can affect all ages and types but those most at risk are youngsters, those that mix in large numbers and horses that travel a lot to competitions and riding club events.

Signs include:

- High temperature
- Nasal discharge
- Cough
- Depression
- Lack of appetite
- Respiratory distress
- Enlarged glands and neck, which can become abscesses

Serious associated complications include 'bastard' Strangles (when abscesses form in other body organs) which develops in up to 10% of cases and is usually fatal. Another complication is purpura haemorrhagica. This condition occurs when blood vessels are damaged and can be identified by swollen limbs and blood blisters around the eyes and lips. It can cause circulatory failure and death.

Not all horses will show all these signs, some may just develop a temperature and seem off-colour. As a result, the disease may be on the premises but undiagnosed until another infected horse shows more typical signs. For further information log on to www.equine-strangles.co.uk.

Recurrent Airway Obstruction (RAO)



Recurrent Airway Obstruction is an airway blockage caused by an allergy to mould spores and dust in the air.



Inhalation of allergy particles causes inflammation of the respiratory tract, resulting in wheezing and breathing difficulties, in a similar way to asthma in humans.

It is the most common respiratory problem seen in horses and is usually the result of long-term exposure to spores, mainly as a result of feeding mouldy hay. However, RAO also develops after other diseases such as EHV, 'flu or strangles.

Signs can vary greatly, with some horses showing virtually no signs, while others fight for breath and become distressed.

Whilst RAO cannot be cured, it can be managed. Efforts should be made to keep stables and the environment dust free.

For example:

- **Hay must be thoroughly soaked**
Either submerge for at least twenty minutes which will reduce the nutritional quality or substitute with another forage such as haylage
- **Fresh air**
Provide horses with RAO with as much fresh air as possible and ideally they should live out
- **Use shavings rather than straw**
Stay clear of straw beds. Shavings are more suitable and cause less dust
- **Don't muck out while your horse is in the stable**
This will cause your horse to breath in even more dust

Prevention



Vaccination will help prevent respiratory diseases such as 'flu, EHV and Strangles.



It is advisable to immunise horses that regularly mix with others. Good yard management is also important and the following tips will help keep respiratory diseases at bay.

- **Follow good hygiene procedures** Comprehensive hygiene procedures will reduce the chances of outbreaks. Use dedicated stable equipment for each horse to help avoid infections, for example buckets, brushes, tack etc.
- **Quarantine** If a horse on your yard is diagnosed with a respiratory disease, it must be quarantined immediately to prevent spread. All new horses on a yard should also be quarantined on arrival for at least three weeks and monitored for signs of disease
- **Limit the number of horses on a yard** Overcrowding increases the likelihood of infection spreading and should be avoided
- **Be vigilant for signs** Horses infected with respiratory diseases may exhibit a number of similar signs. Monitoring your horse closely will help your vet make an accurate diagnosis and reduce the chance of infection spreading
- **Be aware of horses at risk** Respiratory diseases can affect all ages and types but those most at risk are horses kept in large numbers and those which travel a lot, for example to shows, riding club events and competitions
- **Segregate youngsters** Diseases such as 'flu are most common in youngsters under two years of age.
- **Vaccination** Vaccination is the best way to prevent your horse from contracting respiratory diseases that are caused by viruses or bacteria. Allowing your horse's booster vaccinations to lapse may expose it to infection.